

THE
PELICAN
WARNING

ONE BIRD'S CRY.
A TIDE OF LIES.
HER FIGHT TO
SAVE IT ALL.

AN ELLA STRAWBERRY
MYSTERY
PREQUEL

B. ANNE
STEVENS

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Praise for *The Pelican Warning*

“This story was so upbeat and exciting! I could genuinely feel my pulse beating at certain points and fell in love with all the characters by the end. I’m so excited to read more of Ella Strawberry’s life and adventures!”

—Percy Harrington, Teen Girls Leader,
Crosspoint Church, Nashville

“This short story is perfect for anyone who wants more of Ella Strawberry books, or for those looking for a great short story. If you like Ella Strawberry, then make sure to check out this more in-depth story of Ella’s past.”

—Millie, 15 years old, Missouri

*For Charlize—my niece—whose unwavering
bravery and resolve saved a life.*

*“Never be afraid to trust an unknown
future to a known God.”*

—Corrie ten Boom

CHAPTER 1

MOST GIRLS MY age would think I had it all. Did I?

The waves rolled with steady swishes, breaking through the morning quiet of my own private beach. Well, sort of mine. I lived in an elite neighborhood just a few miles from a prominent West Coast marina—home to an upscale resort owned by my parents. In fact, they owned a whole chain, but home base was The Stefanopoulos Resorts at Long Beach, a coveted tourist destination where I could book a suite pretty much any time I wanted, order room service, and freely partake of most, if not all, the guest amenities. A place I loved—and hated in equal measure.

I had very few choices in my life. And not just because my parents were overprotective—they were way too busy for that. I was their only child and heir apparent, destined to follow in my parents' footsteps. My father, Dimitri Stefanopoulos, had big plans for me to learn the business and keep the legacy going, as it were. And Dad wasn't exactly someone who took "no" for an answer. I was like a princess confined to a castle. A girl with everything, but forced into an arranged marriage. Well, not quite. In my case, there wasn't a prospective prince—or any boy, for that matter.

I didn't do much outside of our resort life. Between school,

a 4.0 grade point average, five high-maintenance pets, and my hotel job as a lifeguard, I was swamped. Last year, a girl named Charlotte aced a bunch of Advanced Placement classes and graduated with a 4.36 GPA. She went to some fancy Ivy League school that gave her a full scholarship. If she could pull that off, so could I. So much pressure—not so I could become a hotelier, but because a good GPA gave me other options. Sure, Dad and Mom had built an amazing life, but I also wanted freedom to discover my own purpose. What was I supposed to do? My chest caved inward. Dad wouldn't understand. He just didn't get me.

I couldn't waste my last lazy day of summer vacation. Tomorrow meant actual responsibilities again. Gentle foamy edges from the tide slid in and out around my ankles. Wet sand beneath my feet shifted with each step, firm one second, then giving way and sucking at the skin around my heels. I lifted my face to the rising sun to feel the warmth. The moist breeze lifted my long, thick, tangled hair from my neck, carrying a fine mist that tasted salty on my lips. Seaweed and ocean life made the beach air smell wildly alive.

A gull cried somewhere overhead, sharp and echoey until the sound was swallowed by the rhythm of the waves. I loved being alone on the beach, away from the chaos, observing a different kind of choreography unfold. The tiniest shoreline creatures vanished into the sand with each pull of the tide. A pod of pelicans glided in harmony, barely over the water's surface, then sudden drama unfolded when they dove and emerged with a wriggling fish—only to be harassed by laughing seagulls trying to steal their catch. Further out, occasional movement broke the surface, perhaps a dolphin. On the beach, I became a part of nature. Nothing else mattered. The layers of earth, sea, and sky all supported each other. This was peace.

It wasn't like I hated school. On the contrary, I was great at it. I could be myself and pursue my own interests. I was

seen there. But tomorrow kicked off high-performance mode, which was critical to prep for the following year when I applied to the best universities in the country. A heavy twinge cut through me. I definitely dreaded bringing up my career plans with Dad. I was sure he wouldn't pay for college if I didn't go where he wanted. I had to be prepared with scholarships just in case.

Mom let me and my best friend Angela stay in a suite for one last sleepover before the first day of our sophomore year. No more sundresses and flip-flops. Ugh—the dreaded school uniform, a neatly pressed reminder that I didn't have a choice. And why did everyone always ask, “What did you do this summer?” What a silly question.

I always said, “Not much,” which was true. I didn't like to talk about my personal life. So what if I spent endless days on the beach or in the spa? Other people's dream vacation was my castle without any exits. I couldn't expect anyone to understand. Except for Angela.

I would die without Angela.

The cell phone in the pocket of my beach dress buzzed.

I tapped the camera icon. “Hey, Ang.” My friend's round black eyes and a disproportionately large smile filled the screen. The camera view included her mother's swift fingers, expertly feeding extensions into Angela's natural roots to create her twenty-six-inch-long braids.

“That's gonna be gorgeous,” I said, dragging my own wind-blown hair out of my face.

“Where are you?” Angela said. “Mom says she can start your highlights this morning if you get over here. Plus, I'd like to do last-minute school shopping later at the outdoor mall.”

Angela's mom, Jacqueline, mumbled through my screen. “I don't know why y'all have to school shop when you wear uniforms.”

Angela gave an exaggerated look of surprise. “Mom. Hello. We have lots of other needs—”

“Like the right backpack,” I said. I dropped my flip-flops from my other hand and scooted my toes into them.

Jacqueline peeked into the view. “Mornin’ Elliana.”

I waved to the screen. “Hi, Mrs. Robertson. Thanks for doing my hair. I’ll head inside now.”

A sudden raspy barking sound behind me made me turn. Enormous thrashing wings swished inches over me like a plane about to crash-land. I pulled the screen away to watch a large white pelican flap wildly off-balance before an awkward touchdown on a large boulder by the reef.

I held my hand over my eyes to shield them from the morning glare. “Odd.”

“What’s wrong?” Angela pushed her face close to the camera, and her mom jerked her head back and told her to sit still.

I stepped toward the rocks. The feathered behemoth eyed me, his oversized beak too big for his head. He bobbled on spindly legs, unable to lift off. “I don’t know—there’s something wrong with this bird.”

“What bird?” Angela said.

I flipped the camera around. “Look at this American White. He must be ahead of the migration. But he can barely stand on his feet.”

“He looks huge. Be careful, El.”

Just then, the hulking, broad-bodied pelican pitched sideways and toppled right off the rock, tumbling to the sand with a thud. I cried out, then stepped closer. “Are you okay, Big Guy?” The wind-ruffled feathers shuddered in a tangled heap of webbed feet, rubbery pouch, and unfolded wings. I crouched, in awe of the size, which looked way bigger up close. His leathery gray bill pulsed open and shut like he was

desperate for air. Pelicans were mouth-breathers, so this was a problem.

I scanned the beach. It was only 7:30 a.m. Too early for the vacationers, and the grounds staff would just be changing shifts.

Overhead, barking-like squawks made me look up. Several common brown pelicans glided in circular formation like majestic guardians, but they kept their distance. The white ones flew south for the winter, but a stray loner this early in the season was unusual. "Where's your flock?"

"Elliana?" Angela's face frowned on the screen.

"I'll call you back." I hung up.

I slowly reached out a finger and touched a feather on the top of his exposed wing. The bird quivered. There wasn't any visible blood or injuries. Maybe he ate something that hurt him. Would he die if left alone? My vet would know. I pursed my lips inward, chewing on my upper lip. I checked the time. Angela was expecting me, but I couldn't just leave the pelican to die.

CHAPTER 2

THE SPRAWLING RESORT spread along the beach with clusters of villa-style buildings connected by open-air breezeways, garden paths, and courtyards. From the beach, the receiving dock sat on the far-right side of the property, tucked behind a row of service corridors and tall stucco walls that kept it out of sight—and out of mind—of the guests drifting between pools and palm-lined walkways. Less sunscreen and coconut, more diesel and damp cardboard.

I shoved through a heavy steel door, struggling to hold the large box, which I almost dropped when I bumped into Isabela Viscari, our curator.

I exhaled. “Isabela. I’m so glad to see you. This thing must weigh more than ten pounds.” Her eyes cut downward, and she jumped back at least three feet. Not helpful.

“Elliana!” She clapped her hand over her heart. “That thing can’t be in here.”

“Don’t worry, the vet is coming to meet me. I just need to find a good spot.”

“The vet?” She blinked at me like I switched languages. “Oh no. You can’t bring that wild . . . bird . . . that huge—”

“Pelican.”

“Whatever. You can’t bring that inside. Go put it back.”

I gave a furious headshake. “There’s something really wrong. I can’t just leave it to die on the beach.”

Isabela crossed her arms over her thin frame and glowered at me through her square glasses. “That’s exactly what you should do, Elliana. It’s nature. Circle of life and all.”

“No, this is different. I can tell. And if it swallowed trash or something, we can help it. And maybe clean things up better. It’s better here than a guest finding it, wouldn’t you say?”

Her mouth pinched shut.

I used my head to point to an empty workbench-style table. “I’ll just go over here for now and arrange for an animal rescue to come after the vet checks him out.”

“I need that table to sort my deliveries. I have some new art arriving this morning.”

The pelican shifted, and I tried to balance the box on one knee for support. “Please, Isabela. I won’t be long. I’ll stay out of your way, I promise.”

Isabela sucked air through her nose. Her eyes flitted around as if looking for an alternative. “Well, he better be gone by nine. This is my staging area, and I can’t deal with a pelican in a box.” She threw her hands up and turned in a huff.

She’d get over it. She was always too busy and stressed to get into my business. The awkward weight distribution made the box slip. I clutched the flimsy cardboard flaps as I shuffled across the large receiving area, trying not to drop the pelican. Scattered workers cast curious glances but carried on.

With industrial flat-white walls and a scuffed cement floor, everyone called this The Warehouse, which consisted of several receiving docks, machinery, forklifts, and organized rows of metal racks full of deliveries for the various departments. Despite the oil-and-iron smells, there was an occasional whiff of breakfast, probably because the kitchen wasn’t far from one of the service corridors. My stomach rumbled, but I couldn’t leave the pelican alone.

I hoisted the box on top of the table. The pelican strained to lift his head but only managed an inch. His body pulsed with rapid, shallow breaths. I reached in to smooth the feathers of one wing. "It's okay, Big Guy. We'll get it figured out."

I pulled out my phone. "Hey, Ang. Sorry, I can't get my hair done this morning. I've got a vet coming, and depending on what he says, I may have to take this guy over to a rescue or rehab or something."

"A vet! Girl, don't tell me you're rescuing that pelican." I cringed, picturing her disgusted, no-nonsense expression whenever she was annoyed.

"Well . . . I . . . uh, I couldn't just leave the poor guy out there to die."

"Okay, well . . . where are you? I'm about done. I'll come help."

My forehead lifted "You sure? I know this wasn't how you planned our last day of freedom."

"I gotcha."

I scooted a chair over and waited for Dr. Finch to arrive. Ironic name, but he was really good. I had him on speed dial. He took care of my parrot and all my other pets—basically at my beck and call. I know it bugged Dad, but my vet bills were always paid.

A familiar, loud male voice echoed through the hall along with hurried footsteps, and he nearly passed me without noticing. He spoke into his cell phone. "I know, Jacqueline, I'm looking now. I didn't get a confirmation of any salon shipment . . . yes . . . I know you need the spa minerals. I'll update you as soon as I can." He stopped with a surprised look.

"Hi, Uncle Tommy." I gave him a cheerful smile, scrunching my shoulders up like I was caught doing something I shouldn't.

"Elliana? What are you doing here?" His dark, bushy eyebrows disappeared behind the dark wavy Greek hair that fell

almost into his eyes. A handsome, commanding figure, with a low booming voice—just like my father.

I launched into my explanation, but he waved me off, already distracted. “Elliana, this is a serious sanitation issue, especially with food deliveries coming through here. On top of everything, the health inspectors are coming today to grade the kitchen. Get that thing out of here now.”

My face fell. I muttered, “Okay, Uncle Tommy.”

He gave me a quick head rub like I was a little kid. “Great. I know you’ll figure it out.” He started to leave, and then turned as if remembering something. “Oh, and if a truck shows up with a crate for the salon, let me know, will ya? That stuff comes all the way from Italy.”

His phone went off again, and he turned away. “Isabela. Yes, I know art is supposed to show up, but we need to chat about that exhibit. Angelique is not in favor of it.”

I smirked. My mother wasn’t in favor of most things that weren’t her idea.

“Yes, I know. I’ve tried several times to convince her. Yes, I know it arrives today. But I have meetings with a new investor, so I can’t get to the art situation until that’s over. Okay, we’ll work it out.” He hung up and called for the supervisor. “Hey, Rick!”

“Yeah, boss.” The warehouse manager trotted over. He wore a wrinkled gray dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, tucked in, with a radio on his belt. Rick had worked here for as long as I could remember. And he called everyone boss, even me.

“Looking for a delivery—some kind of environmental accelerant. We have a new investor who had it sent here for a demo. We need it this afternoon.”

My ears prickled. Environmental accelerant? What did that mean? And what did it have to do with the hotel?

“I’ll watch for it, boss,” Rick said.

“Thanks. It comes in red barrels, so make sure it isn’t mixed up with the regular pool stuff.”

“Yes, boss.”

Uncle Tommy didn’t even look back before rushing off to put out the next fire. A familiar emptiness made my heart ache. I sighed and stroked the top of Big Guy’s head. “This is why I don’t want to learn the family business. It’s too rushed and rude and . . . there’s always some problem that’s more important than mine.”

Where could I go with this pelican? The buzzer at the back door sounded. My vet. Everyone was busy, and Isabela had not returned to check on her deliveries. I disobeyed Uncle Tommy and kept the bird where it was.

While Dr. Finch examined the pelican, I searched online for an appropriate wildlife rehab. But his diagnosis wasn’t anything I expected.

CHAPTER 3

DR. FINCH'S WORDS sent a shockwave through me. Who could do such a thing? And what if the pelican wasn't the only victim? I couldn't just ignore the possibility of others being harmed. And what about my own pets? The guests loved when I brought my talking parrot around, as well as my dog. A sick feeling swirled in my gut.

Angela found me in The Warehouse, arriving just after Dr. Finch left with the bird.

"Poisoned!" Angela said, a bit too loud.

"Shh." I said. "Dr. Finch is running tests, but he's sure the symptoms indicate poisoning. He took Skipper with him—"

"Skipper?"

"Uh, yeah. He had to have a name . . . other than Big Guy."

Angela twisted a handful of new braids in a spiral over the front of her shoulder. One eyebrow lifted higher than the other. "How do you know it's male?"

"I don't. Anyway, Dr. Finch thinks Skipper will recover, but he would've died if I hadn't found him. He said he'll call me when the tests come back."

The steel roll-up doors clanged open with a jolt, revealing a staggered, rumbling line of idling trucks. Workers scrambled

at the start of the morning shift. Someone almost bumped into me and had to skirt around where we stood. “Let’s get out of here,” I said. “It’s getting busy, and they’re giving us funny looks.” I grabbed a towel to wipe off the table we’d used for the bird. “By the way, your hair looks amazing.”

“You might still have time for yours if we go now,” Angela said.

I wasn’t really in the mood anymore. My thick, wavy Greek hair already garnered a lot of attention. Did I really need highlights? “I’m worried about that poison. It had to come from somewhere nearby, and what if more animals on the beach are affected?”

“Or people.”

That stopped me. “Huh?”

“I mean, if something is in the environment nearby, couldn’t it affect the people too?”

A chill snaked down my spine as the implication beyond just animals sank in.

An incessant beep-beep-beep of a forklift startled me. My eyes fell on the pallet of wooden crates being transported off the loading dock. One was labeled in big red block letters:

ORGANIC

Angela pointed. “Oh, wait. Mom said to check for her spa stuff when I came down here. I bet that’s it.”

We hung back to watch, but instead of the crate being parked with the others, it was loaded onto a metal flatbed cart. A worker used a crowbar to loosen the top, then rolled the cart across the receiving area, past where we stood, down a corridor,

and through an arched wooden door I'd never noticed before. We followed at a distance.

"That's so strange," I said.

"Why would they take Mom's stuff in there?"

I shrugged. "Let's find out."

The door was ajar, and it was dark inside. We slipped in. The instant smell of old bricks and mildew invaded my senses. My eyes adjusted to the low light filtering in from the corridor.

"Where are we?" Angela whispered.

I stifled a sneeze. "It looks like an old cellar or something. I know the resort inside and out, but I've never seen this before. I saw pictures, though, before renovations. It's probably from the past."

"There's the crate. Seems big for the stuff my mom orders."

I lifted the wooden slat top. Four large red plastic barrels filled the crate, packed in brown cushioning material. I reached in to pull off a taped packing slip and tilted it toward the faint light. "It says EcoGuard. Looks like chemicals, but it's hard to read. Does your mom use chemicals in the spa?"

Angela shrugged. "They have the whirlpool baths. I assume they use chemicals."

"I'll take a pic, and we can ask her about it. There must be some mix-up for them to put her supplies in this cellar."

A loud bang made us both jump. The sliver of light from the hall disappeared, and everything went black. "Someone shut the door!" Angela cried, as we both fumbled for our phone flashlights, casting weak beams around to get our bearings.

Angela stood close, her arm brushing mine. "Let's try to open the door quietly and get out of here."

I pointed my phone to the dirty, basement-style floor. We shuffled in the direction we had entered.

Angela exhaled. "Here we are. Thank God."

The backside of the old wooden door was rough with splinters, reinforced by heavy cross boards and dull brass hardware.

No knob, just a handle. I pushed. Nothing. I pulled. It didn't move.

A cold weight dropped into my stomach. "It's locked!" I ran my hand and the phone light over the wood. "It won't open from the inside."

"They must have bolted it out there."

The fear in Angela's voice matched the adrenaline surging through my chest. I couldn't panic. "We're trapped."

"We might have to call someone," Angela said.

"That would be embarrassing."

"Yeah, but who knows when someone'll come back this way to open the door?" Her words hung in the dark.

We stood in eerie silence. Then Angela spoke. "Elliana. This is really dumb."

I winced, then let out a sigh. "I know. I feel dumb. Okay. I'll call Uncle Tommy. I'd rather be embarrassed with him than try to explain this to my dad. And I don't want to bother my mom. She'd have a fit. I wouldn't hear the end of it for weeks."

"Thanks, I'd rather not call my mom either."

I tapped my screen. Nothing. "Oh no." I tapped harder. "I don't have service here." A sick feeling edged up my throat. "Do you?"

Angela pressed her thumb hard against her screen, then slapped the phone in her palm. "No."

"What do we do?" My voice tightened.

"Let's just think for a second," Angela said. "We could scream and pound on the door."

I hesitated. "Any better idea?"

"No."

"Ok, well let's both do it."

Our fists hit the door in uneven bursts at first, then synced into a hard pounding rhythm. I ignored the sharp stings traveling up my arms. The heavy surface only answered with a deep hollow thud.

“Help!” I shouted, my voice cracking against the cellar walls. Angela continued slamming the wood, but the impact was dull and useless.

“Hey, we’re in here! Someone—help!” Angela yelled from deep in her chest, but the sound only bounced off the bricks.

Pressure built behind my eyes and I fought tears. I slowed my blows. “It’s no use. This place is like a bomb shelter. No one can hear anything out there.” I dropped my arms, and Angela followed.

We fell quiet again before Angela said, “We may have to stop using our flashlights or the batteries could die. I’m at fifty percent.”

I shuddered and peeked at mine. “Seventy-two percent.” An idea crossed my mind. “There should be lights somewhere, right?”

The narrow glow of our phones dragged across brick as we searched for a switch. We stepped carefully around the perimeter of the room, avoiding scattered boxes. We passed an opening in a wall, and our feeble lights were swallowed by the extended darkness.

“Is that a tunnel?” Angela’s voice quivered.

“Ugh, it’s like a dungeon or something.”

“I’m already borderline claustrophobic, El. This is sending me over the edge.”

My light caught something metal. “Here. It looks like an old breaker box.” I pressed closer to the wall, studying handwritten words scratched and faded with age. Useless. A thick matrix of cobwebs draped across rows of black switches. “Yuck.” A larger black rectangular switch sat at the top. “I’m going to try it.” I held my breath and reached for it. Sticky strands of web crossed my knuckles, making me whine deep in my throat.

I flipped the switch. A dead click was all I got.

“Oh no,” Angela whispered.

Dread settled hard in my chest. “We have to go down that tunnel.”

“I’m not going down that tunnel.”

“We have to, while we still have battery life. The tunnel has to go somewhere, right? There has to be another door. If they used this in the past, it probably goes to another part of the hotel.”

The sound of our nervous breaths filled the dark space, neither of us wanting to move forward. “I’ll go first,” I whispered.

“We’ll go together,” Angela whispered back. “If I pass out, you can catch me.”

Our steps were slow and silent, as if trying to hide—though from what, I had no idea. We walked so close, our sides pressed together. Our phone lights illuminated only a few feet in front of us. Our breathing sounded too loud.

Angela clucked her tongue. “I can just hear it now—‘What did you do this summer?’ ‘Me and Elliana got stuck in a cellar and had to eat rats to survive.’”

“Just keep going,” I said.

A crackly sound echoed from somewhere. Angela squeezed closer to me, her shoe tripping on mine. “Did you hear that? It’s a rat.”

“Shut up.”

“Or maybe we’ll die in here and no one will ever find us.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Maybe we’ll be eaten by the rats.”

“Angela!” I gave a sharp, frustrated exhale.

We walked for another few minutes and the air changed. “I think I see something. It feels different.” The walls of the tunnel opened up.

“I think this is another room,” Angela said.

A square shape of crumbling brick appeared, making us halt in our tracks. We stepped around it. “Maybe this was

where they kept the coal, you know, like in the old days,” I said.

Our small lights hit walls. More boxes and crates littered the space. “Nothing but storage now.”

I pointed. “There’s a door!”

We rushed forward through the debris. Angela grabbed the handle and shoved. The door swung open easily, letting in a flood of light. I let out a long breath. In my scramble to get out of the cellar, my hip caught the corner of another crate. “Ow!” Then I stopped. Those red block letters again:

ORGANIC

“What is it?” Angela asked.

“That crate. It’s the same—”

I yanked up the loosened lid. The same red plastic drums. One of them had been opened. “I’m just going to peek.” Using my thumb, I lifted the edge. “It looks like a pink powder of some sort. I wonder . . . if this is the environmental accelerant Uncle Tommy was talking about with Rick.” But why would Uncle Tommy want this stuff here?

“I wouldn’t touch that,” Angela said. “And let’s pleeease get out of here.”

We stepped out of the musty brick smell into something heavier, like tangy metal and damp concrete. Overhead fluorescent lights buzzed, and an incessant, layered humming radiated from pipes that snaked in all directions, each labeled either RETURN, SUPPLY, or DRAIN.

I stopped and coughed out a chlorine-filled breath. “I know where we are.”

Narrow trenches cut the perimeter of the sealed cement floor, sending trickling runoff water into grated drains. “We’re next to the outdoor pool—this is all the filter systems and stuff.”

The pool filtration system assumed the largest footprint, with a row of dull gray cylindrical filters, each fitted with ticking gauges. Chemical storage drums labeled for various purposes connected by feed lines into the piping system. My throat stung from the sharp, mineralized air. Laminated warning placards and instructions were bolted at eye level at every turn.

Angela paused for a moment, then leaned forward and squinted. “Look at that.” She stepped over PVC pipe and crouched by a cylindrical receptacle connecting a tube into a valve on one of the large pipes. “There’s pink powder down here. All around this container.”

I weaved and bobbed through the obstacle course to reach Angela. A strange feeling twisted in my gut. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I pulled out my phone. “I’m taking pictures of this. Something feels off. Uncle Tommy told Rick to be sure some environmental accelerant wasn’t mixed in with the pool stuff.”

“Well, if this pink stuff is the same chemical he was talking about, it’s mixing with the pool stuff,” Angela said.

We stepped around the filtration toward the far wall where another door appeared.

“I bet this door goes outside.” We leaned against the push bar, exiting into a brush area that surrounded the physical plant where maintenance and grounds stored their equipment.

We both exhaled in relief. Angela put her palms on either side of her head and bent at the waist. “Not gonna lie, I was panicked. I thought we’d never again see the light of day.”

“I know, me too.” I gulped a fresh supply of sea air. I checked my phone. “Whew. We have service again.”

Angela pulled some brush away from the wall by the door. "Look. This is one of the drainpipes. That pink stuff is going straight out into wherever this flows."

"Like the reef?" I said.

No one was around. I knew there weren't cameras on this side. A golf-cart-style utility vehicle drove into the physical plant parking lot area a little distance from us. We weren't noticeable, especially if no one was looking.

A seagull screeched.

"Wait. This is close to the rocks." I hurried down the walk, my steps picking up speed. "Angela, look where we are." I pointed toward the sand. "This is exactly where I found the pelican this morning."

Angela's eyes flashed in understanding. "Very close to those strange chemicals . . . and the drainpipes."

I couldn't shake the cold sensation crawling over me. Chemicals. Hidden. In *our* hotel. What did my family have to do with this? "We have to find out what those barrels are doing here and why."

"Or," Angela shot back, grabbing my arm, "let's tell someone who actually knows what they're doing and let them handle it."

"Like who?"

"Your parents? Maybe there's a perfectly good reason these barrels are here."

I lowered my voice but not the intensity. "Animals are getting poisoned, Angela. That doesn't just happen by itself."

Angela still gripped my arm. "Elliana, we don't even know for sure what this stuff is. Which is exactly why we don't go poking around on our own. It could be dangerous. You already got me stuck in a cellar. And don't forget—we have school tomorrow."

"Then there's no time to waste."

Her voice cracked, frustrated. "That's not what that means!"

It means we tell someone who can handle it, and we get on with our last day of vacation.”

The silence was tight between us.

“I want to investigate now because everyone else is too busy. They won’t take me seriously unless I have solid proof that something’s wrong.”

Angela exhaled through her nose. “Elliana . . . first, you’re jumping to conclusions. Second, if we do find something bad . . . we’ll be in way over our heads.”

I hesitated for a second. “Then we already are.”